

OPINION

It is time for a new mantra: Go outside, but do not congregate

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People walk, ride bikes and inline skate on Queen Elizabeth Drive in Ottawa, as it is closed to motor vehicle traffic to allow people to get outdoors while practising physical distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, on May 3, 2020.

JUSTIN TANG/THE CANADIAN PRESS

After almost two months of being told to “stay at home,” it’s time for a new mantra.

As provinces start easing the restrictions, allowing everything from haircuts to golf games to school openings, we need to loosen the shackles on individuals, too.

“Please go outside” is the message we now need to hear to maintain our sanity and hope.

And “please go outside” is exactly what Bonnie Henry, B.C.’s soothingly sensible Provincial Health Officer, is now telling people to do.

Go outside, but respect physical distancing rules and, above all, don’t congregate.

Before people start complaining that officials are back-pedaling, let’s be clear about one thing: As the pandemic changes, so too must the public-health and political messaging.

The lockdown was appropriate, but never meant to be forever.

On May 7, join André Picard for an Instagram Live on reopening society after COVID-19

The “stay at home” rules were designed to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus within communities so hospitals would not be overwhelmed.

The horror show unfolding in long-term care homes notwithstanding, the approach is working. In most of the country, we are flattening the epidemic curve.

Of course, that’s not sufficient. We still have almost 1,500 new cases and 100 deaths daily in Canada – most in Quebec and Ontario, and in accursed institutional care.

As the pandemic curve flattens, the public needs to be rewarded for its sacrifices. We need to ease out of confinement with thoughtful deconfinement measures.

The best place to start is the safest, by easing restrictions on outdoor activity.

As Dr. Henry said: “The risk that somebody who is sick spreads this virus from coughing or sneezing outside and you walk by them very quickly, even when it is within six feet, that risk ... would be infinitesimally small.”

To date, 312 detailed studies have been published about clusters of coronavirus infections. There is not a single case of infection by casual contact outdoors.

Let children play. Let people walk. Let our elders get some fresh air. Get the community gardens blossoming. Extend the bubble a bit beyond individual households.

That doesn't mean a free-for-all. "Don't congregate" is the new golden rule.

Beyond that, the rules of physical distancing have to be coherent and consistent.

We can't pretend that it's perfectly safe for workers to toil elbow-to-elbow in meat packing plants while telling families they can't picnic a few metres apart.

We can't say it's fine for kids to go back to school but it's not okay for them to kick a soccer ball around.

We can't say it's okay for the those who breathe rarified air to hit the links, but it's not okay for the hoi polloi to shoot hoops.

We can't lock away seniors indefinitely – especially healthy seniors who are suffering terribly during the pandemic.

In our rush to get people back to work, we can't embrace flagrant double standards.

The way to avoid congregations of people in parks and on streets is not to punish them for being out-and-about, it's to create more space.

We need to close streets – partly or entirely – to give people more room to circulate safely, especially in large urban centres. We need to let people use parks to their full extent – enough of this "stay on the path or be fined" nonsense.

Above all, we need to trust the public. There is every indication that Canadians are following the rules, but we have to help them understand the changes.

We're not going to police our way out of the pandemic.

What we're going to have to do is create a new normal that allows us to live while minimizing disease transmission.

That will mean big changes, in everything from social norms to our physical environment.

It will take a lot more time and energy and patience to ease out of public-health restrictions than it took to impose them. And some may be reimposed if cases spike again.

As such, communicating clearly becomes more important than ever.

If we think figuring out if you can go to the park or not is complicated, wait until we start fashioning the new workplace rules.

Limiting the spread of viral disease is way more difficult in closed indoor spaces than open outdoor spaces. We should breathe easy while we can.

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